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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 001866

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SUBJECT: KING UNMOVED BY NDI EFFORT TO RETURN TO BAHRAIN

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (B)(D)

11. (C) Summary. National Democratic Institute (NDI) Chairman Madeleine Albright visited Bahrain October 28 in an effort to find a way for NDI to resume its activities in Bahrain. She received a warm welcome -- both officially and unofficially -- but was unable to achieve a breakthrough on a return of NDI to Bahrain. She pressed hard in her meeting with the King, who gave no ground and said that it was important that Bahrain's reform process not be seen as an American project. Things were going well, he maintained, and he did not want to provoke people and destroy the effort. He urged that NDI find a way to work through the Bahrain Institute for Political Development (BIPD). On the positive side, Dr. Albright hosted a well-attended reception for political activists and members of political societies, including members of a delegation traveling to Washington this week to participate in an NDI-funded program to observe the U.S. elections. A well-respected columnist attributed the regime's reluctance to welcome NDI back to the link being made to the American efforts in Iraq, suggesting that the leadership is comparing NDI's efforts with the Shia opposition in Bahrain to the U.S. support for Shia in Iraq. While the King gave little room for optimism in the short run, it is possible that the political temperature in Bahrain will cool once the Bahraini elections are over and attention turns to the new Parliament in December. We will continue to push the NDI case (Undersecretary Hughes raised it with the Crown Prince November 1), but do not expect any positive movement -- if it comes -- at least until after the elections. End summary.

12. (C) NDI Chairman Madeleine Albright held a full day of meetings in Bahrain October 28 in an effort to find a way for NDI to resume its activities in Bahrain after its office was closed and its local representative sent home last June. The key meeting was with the King. After opening pleasantries, Dr. Albright got right to the point, stating that she wanted to talk frankly about what could be done to bring NDI back to Bahrain and restore the strong relationship that had worked so well for four years until NDI's abrupt departure in May. The King replied that the key for Bahrain's reform process is that it be seen as a home-grown model. Democracy will take time to develop in Bahrain. Bahrain is about to hold its second parliamentary elections. It hopes the elections will go well. But Bahrain has to be careful. It cannot let the reform process be seen as an American project. Extremists will exploit that. "Having an American institution here at this time will cause people to say that I am introducing

reforms here because of the Americans," he stated.

¶3. (C) The King said that there was a regional context to the NDI situation. Saudi Arabia once had its own "NDI" in Bahrain, teaching Wahhabism. He closed it down. The Iranians would like to teach Khomeini-ism. If Bahrain had institutes from the U.S., Britain, France, Iran, and India, all teaching their brand of democracy, it would lead to a cutting off of bridges to fellow Gulf states. And that would not be good from a reform point of view, because Bahrain is actually influencing reform in the Gulf countries in a positive way. The UAE currently has a team from Bahrain helping organize their elections. Bahrain is helping the Qataris. Sultan Qaboos has called Bahrain a model for reform. Bahrain's leadership on women's issues has had an impact in the Gulf. This could all be jeopardized if the Gulf countries see that an American institution is leading the democracy effort in Bahrain. They will regard Bahrain as a front for the Americans. "Frankly," he stated, "I don't want to provoke people to destroy what we are doing. Things are going well."

¶4. (C) At the same time, the King continued, "we do want to work with NDI." His solution, he stated, was to form his own "NDI," the Bahrain Institute for Political Development (BIPD), which would have links with many foreign institutes, especially NDI. He urged that NDI work through BIPD. It is a new organization. "We would like BIPD to be on your side."

¶5. (C) Dr. Albright also discussed NDI during a lunch hosted by Minister of Information/MFA Minister of State Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar and attended by MFA Assistant Undersecretary Shaikh Abdel Aziz bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa. BIPD head Lulwa

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Al-Awadi was expected to attend, but bowed out at the last minute, citing a conflict with a meeting she had with the King's wife, Shaikha Sabika. Abdul Ghaffar and Shaikh Abdel Aziz expressed hope that the NDI problem could be resolved, and attributed the current difficulties to a perception that NDI had become too closely aligned with the opposition Al-Wifaq society, as well as dissatisfaction with NDI's former Bahrain representative Fawzi Guleid. Abdul Ghaffar also mentioned a program NDI had run on redistricting which, he said, had raised sensitive issues, rubbed the leadership wrong, and not helped its cause.

¶6. (C) In the meeting with Shaikha Sabika, which was attended by BIPD's Lulwa Al-Awadi, the King's wife proposed that the Supreme Council for Women sign an MOU with NDI to run programs on economic empowerment of women. Her proposal seemed to encompass programs outside of NDI's mandate.

¶7. (SBU) While Dr. Albright made no headway on a return of NDI to Bahrain, final arrangements are being concluded for a delegation of 15 Bahrainis, both from political societies and from the government (including BIPD), to travel to Washington to observe the U.S. elections. (The group departed for the U.S. on October 31.) Dr. Albright hosted a well-attended reception for members of the delegation, as well as members of political societies, women activists, Shura Council members, and representatives from civil society.

¶8. (U) One of the attendees was influential columnist Sawsan Sha'er, who recounted in an October 30 column a conversation she had with Dr. Albright at the reception. She said that she told Albright that she might not agree with the way the regime dealt with NDI, but she also understood the regime's fears and suspicions that made it insist not only on expelling the institute but ensuring that it not work independently. She told Albright there is a mental link connecting everything democratic and American with the Iraq situation. They look at U.S. policy in the region, especially in Iraq, with suspicious eyes because of what they perceive to be the U.S. policy of excluding and marginalizing Sunnis in Iraq. "Nobody can help but compare your efforts to

contact and meet with the opposition that is wearing turbans in Bahrain with your American guardianship of Al-Hakim, which led him to a decision-making position in Iraq," she stated. "Your efforts are viewed as a repetition of the Iraqi scenario."

¶9. (U) In a second column on October 31, Sha'er expanded on this theme, stating: "We have two realities that we cannot ignore if we are to decide on the relationship between our NGOs and American expertise. First, there are the suspicions about the repetition of the American Iraqi example which marginalized Sunnis and generated talk about a Shia crescent. These are suspicions that Bahrain has, and we can understand this if we take into consideration the size of the Shia bloc (in Bahrain).... Second, we must admit modestly that we need to benefit from the advanced American expertise, which an organization like the UN cannot provide, let alone Arab institutions (comment: she was no doubt referring to BIPD) that some of our organizations try in vain to use as a substitute for American expertise.... We were hoping that Bahrain would deal with American expertise with self-confidence and transparency...."

¶10. (C) Comment: Sha'er's commentaries underscore the challenge that NDI faces in Bahrain in the current environment: getting the government to accept needed and desired American expertise on democratic reform in a country whose leadership (Sunni rulers with a Shia majority population) is on edge in a turbulent region. The King gave little hope for optimism in the short run. On the other hand, the government has approved participation in an NDI-sponsored program to observe election day in the U.S. And it is possible that the political temperature in Bahrain will cool once the Bahraini elections are concluded and attention turns to the new Parliament. We should continue to push NDI's case, but we do not expect any positive movement -- if indeed the government is to ease its position -- at least until after the elections.

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